Call for proposals

DEMONSTRATOR 2026

Information document including submission and evaluation guidelines and budget rules
For more information on the programme, please visit
https://www.blauwecluster.be/blue-bastion-innovatieprojecten

Important dates:

- Information day: Wednesday 6 May (10h00 - 13h00)
- Deadline proposals: Monday 8 June 2026 (23h59)
- Start date projects: Tuesday 1 September 2026
- End date project: 28 February 2028

SUMMARY

The RHID & Blue Cluster **Blue Bastion Demonstrator call 2026** stimulates the rapid demonstration of innovative solutions for the **protection of critical maritime infrastructure**, with a strong focus on collaboration within consortia.

This call supports projects with a maximum duration of **six months** and funding of up to EUR **350,000 per project**, aimed at technological demonstrations in near-realistic maritime environments.

- The call fosters an ecosystem in which **industry, knowledge institutions, and operational stakeholders collaborate** on integrated solutions, with an emphasis on themes such as surveillance, autonomous systems, AI, cybersecurity, and communications.
- Projects must align with the **strategic roadmap** 'Maritime Security' of the Blue Cluster and contribute to operational relevance, risk mitigation, and preparation for entry into the European market.
- The deadline for submitting proposals is 8 June 2026, with project **start dates on 1 September 2026** and an end date of 28 February 2027.

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1. RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT, INNOVATION AND INDUSTRIALIZATION OF THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

1.1. CONTEXT

Scientific and technological research in the domain of security and defence is key to maintaining the Belgian Defence military and technological edge, to face current and future security challenges. For this purpose, the Ministry of Defence (2025) (https://www.mil.be/media/ulunodln/strategische-visie-2025-integraal.pdf) seeks to further develop and strengthen the links between Defence, the national research institutions and the industry by gradually increasing its R&T contribution as from 2022, with a view to reaching 2% of the total defence effort in 2030. The setup pf the Blue Cluster ecosystem on the protection of critical maritime infrastructure its perfectly in and contributes to the implementation of this strategic vision and general policy for Defence.

1.2. ROLE OF THE ROYAL HIGHER INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE - RHID

As a "smart hub" and "honest broker" for scientific and technological research, the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID) is responsible for the development and implementation of the Ministry of Defence's policy on scientific and technological research. Within this policy, twelve focus areas have been identified, in which research is actively supported and stimulated. As a "smart hub", RHID aims to promote the growth of Belgian scientific and technological research in the field of defence and security, as well as to restore and strengthen the links between administrations, universities and companies at this prospect. It wishes to achieve this, among others, by promoting and facilitating the participation of Belgium and the Belgian Ministry of Defence in international, national and regional research programmes. In addition, the results of research are published annually for a wide audience and colloquia are held regularly. As an "honest broker", RHID manages and facilitates, through the department Research, Development, Innovation and Industrialization (RDII), the research programme of the Ministry of Defence. Although in the past this programme was primarily reserved for Defence research institutions, collaboration with other partners, including Belgian research institutes and industry, is increasingly becoming the norm. The Ministry of Defence wants to further develop its capabilities through collaborative research with external partners by launching open calls for proposals within the frame of its research programme. The current call is the first Blue Bastion call as part of development of an ecosystem on maritime security and defence where applicants can propose research and developments projects in the relevant technology domain.

More information on the institute and its activities can be found on the website: https://www.defence institute.be/en/accueil-english/

1.3. BUILDING AN ECOSYSTEM FOR CRITICAL MARITIME INFRASTRUCTURE PROTECTION

The development of an ecosystem for the protection of critical maritime infrastructure originates from the assignment of RHID to the Blue Cluster (www.bluecluster.be) to explore the feasibility and added value of a coordinated, ecosystem-based approach. This assignment reflects the growing strategic importance of maritime domains and the need to move beyond isolated innovation projects towards a structured, scalable, and demand-driven ecosystem that brings together defence, civilian, and dual-use capabilities.

Under this RHID assignment, the Blue Cluster was tasked with assessing how an ecosystem could be built to address emerging threats to ports, offshore energy installations, subsea infrastructure, coastal zones, and maritime traffic. As a neutral innovation orchestrator with strong ties to industry, research organisations, and public authorities, the Blue Cluster is uniquely positioned to align strategic needs with industrial and technological capabilities.

BLUE CLUSTER	The **Blue Cluster** is the industry-driven innovation cluster that brings together companies, knowledge institutions, and public actors active in the blue economy. It stimulates collaboration and innovation across maritime and offshore domains—such as shipping, ports, offshore energy, maritime security, and digital maritime technologies—by connecting stakeholders, facilitating joint projects, and aligning innovation with societal and strategic needs. Acting as a neutral ecosystem orchestrator, the Blue Cluster supports both civilian and dual-use innovation with the aim of strengthening economic resilience and sustainable growth in the maritime domain. https://www.bluecluster.be/

1.3.1. FEASIBILITY STUDY AND STRATEGIC RATIONALE

A dedicated feasibility study, conducted within the framework of the RHID assignment, confirmed both the operational relevance and industrial potential of establishing a maritime security ecosystem. The study highlighted increasing vulnerability of maritime critical infrastructure, the fragmentation of existing solutions, and the need for

integrated approaches combining sensing, surveillance, autonomy, data fusion, and decision support.

The study also demonstrated strong dual-use potential, with overlapping requirements between civilian infrastructure protection and defence-oriented maritime security. It concluded that a coordinated ecosystem—supported by shared testing environments, aligned roadmaps, and sustained stakeholder engagement—would significantly increase innovation efficiency, accelerate deployment, and strengthen resilience at regional and national levels.

See An ecosystem for the protection of critical maritime infrastructure | Blue Cluster

1.3.2. ANCHORING THROUGH RHID AND ECOSYSTEM GOVERNANCE

The RHID assignment provides a structural backbone for transforming the feasibility insights into a concrete innovation pathway. Within this framework, Blue Cluster acts as ecosystem integrator, ensuring coherence between research, industrial development, and operational needs. It lowers entry barriers for SMEs and technology providers, fosters cross-sector collaboration, and connects innovation activities to longer-term defence and security priorities.

This approach shifts the focus from individual technology development to system-level solutions, interoperability, and lifecycle thinking—key elements for effective critical maritime infrastructure protections.

1.3.3. COLLABORATION WITH THE NAVY AND OPERATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

A cornerstone of the ecosystem is the close collaboration with the Navy, infrastructure owners and maritime security authorities, who are involved early and continuously in the innovation process. Their engagement ensures that solutions are operationally relevant, validated in realistic maritime environments, and aligned with existing operational concepts and standards.

This collaboration also strengthens the bridge between civilian and military domains, reinforcing the dual-use character of the ecosystem and facilitating smoother uptake from pilot demonstration to operational deployment. Blue Cluster plays a central role in structuring this interaction and creating trusted spaces for co-development.

1.3.4. OPPORTUNITY WITHIN THE BLUE BASTION CALL

Within this broader ecosystem context, the Blue Bastion call represents a concrete implementation step. One of its core objectives is to initiate and structure collaborative innovation projects that directly contribute to the protection of critical maritime infrastructure. Rather than funding stand-alone technology developments, the call is designed to stimulate consortium-based projects, bringing together industry,

knowledge institutions, and operational stakeholders around shared maritime security challenges.

To enable this, the action—explicitly named Blue Bastion—provides not only project funding, but also the necessary instruments to support ecosystem formation. This includes mechanisms to lower collaboration barriers, align partners around validated operational needs, and facilitate progression from early-stage concepts towards testing and demonstration. In this sense, project funding acts as a strategic tool to catalyse cooperation, de-risk innovation, and accelerate learning across the ecosystem.

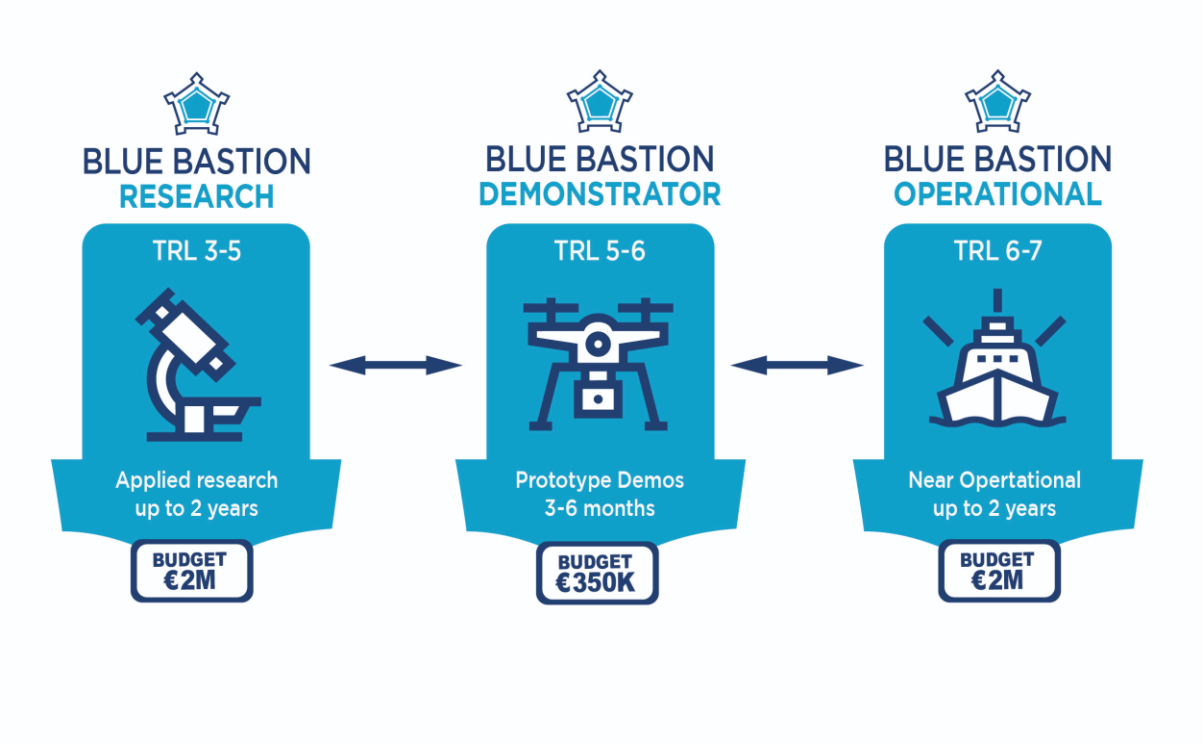
Blue Bastion thus functions as more than a traditional call for proposals. It is an enabling action that strengthens the ecosystem by fostering structured partnerships, encouraging interoperability between solutions, and ensuring that individual projects contribute to a coherent, long-term approach to maritime critical infrastructure protection. Through this action, Blue Cluster reinforces its role as ecosystem orchestrator, translating strategic ambitions and RHID-anchored insights into tangible, collaborative innovation outcomes.

1.4. SUPPORT OF THE BLUE CLUSTER

The Blue Cluster supports Blue Bastion projects throughout their full lifecycle by acting as an ecosystem orchestrator: before the project, it aligns ideas with the maritime security roadmap, mobilises and connects partners, and supports consortium building and proposal shaping; during the project, it facilitates coordination, stakeholder engagement, cross-project synergies and high-visibility demonstrations such as the Navy Captains of Industry Day; and after the project, it ensures valorisation and upscaling of results by promoting outcomes, supporting market and operational uptake, and feeding lessons learned back into the maritime security research and innovation agenda to strengthen the long-term ecosystem for critical maritime infrastructure protection.

1.5. Blue Bastion PROJECT INSTRUMENTS

The Blue Bastion calls are designed to activate collaborative innovation projects that strengthen the protection of critical maritime infrastructure. This first call explicitly focuses on **Blue Bastion Demonstrator** projects, enabling rapid demonstration of potential solutions in relevant maritime environments. In parallel, Blue Bastion also comprises Research and Operational Innovation instruments, which follow a longer-term project logic and are opened on a different schedule.



All projects funded under Blue Bastion must align with the strategic roadmap on maritime security, which provides thematic focus areas, capability priorities, and development pathways for the ecosystem.

Together, these instruments form a coherent portfolio that supports innovation from applied research to near-operational deployment, while ensuring continuity and ecosystem impact. The instruments planned for Blue Bastion include:

1.5.1. Blue Bastion RESEARCH (TRL 3–5)

Blue Bastion Research targets applied research and early-stage development activities aimed at maturing new concepts, technologies, and methodologies for maritime protection. Projects at this level focus on technical feasibility, functional validation, and concept integration beyond basic research.

Projects must demonstrate clear alignment with the roadmap defined in the feasibility study, ensuring that research efforts contribute to identified ecosystem needs and create progression pathways towards later demonstrator or operational innovation projects.

- Typical activities include proof-of-concept development, laboratory testing, early prototyping, and system modelling.
- Project duration: up to 2 years.
- This instrument will be open for applications on a yearly basis, aligned with the standard Blue Cluster project application flow.

1.5.2. Blue Bastion DEMONSTRATOR (TRL 5–6)

Blue Bastion Demonstrator projects focus on the demonstration of solutions in relevant and representative maritime environments, demonstrating possible integration, performance, and added value under near-realistic conditions. Strong emphasis is placed on collaborative consortia, bringing together industry, knowledge institutions, and where relevant, operational stakeholders.

The focus of demonstrator projects is still on innovation and research (TRL <6) and not on implementation or integration (TRL>6). Demonstrators are the last step in a research and innovation track before starting the implementation and integration track.

Demonstrator projects must be positioned within the feasibility study roadmap, clearly indicating which capability gaps, use cases, or development lines they address and how results will contribute to the broader ecosystem.

- Demonstrator projects are designed as short, focused innovation and research actions, enabling fast learning cycles, risk reduction, and visible progress within the ecosystem.
- Project duration: 3 to 6 months.

The current Blue Bastion call focuses exclusively on demonstrator projects. This demonstrator call will be opened twice a year, creating regular opportunities for new consortia to enter the ecosystem and build on previous results.

1.5.3. Blue Bastion OPERATIONAL INNOVATION (TRL 6–7)

Blue Bastion Operational Innovation supports projects that bring solutions close to operational deployment. Activities may include large-scale testing, pilot implementations, integration with existing systems, and validation with end users in operational contexts.

Projects under this instrument must align with the roadmap from the feasibility study, demonstrating contributions to prioritized operational capabilities and long-term ecosystem objectives.

- The focus is on robustness, interoperability, scalability, and readiness for sustained use in maritime protection operations.
- Project duration: up to 2 years.
- This instrument will be open on a yearly basis, following the regular Blue Cluster project submission cycle.

1.5.4. INTEGRATED INNOVATION PIPELINE

The three Blue Bastion instruments collectively form an integrated innovation pipeline, anchored in the maritime security roadmap. Short-cycle demonstrator projects deliver rapid validation and momentum, while research and operational innovation projects provide depth, continuity, and long-term impact.

Through this structured approach, Blue Bastion uses project funding as a strategic tool to build collaboration, ensure roadmap coherence, and accelerate ecosystem-wide innovation for maritime critical infrastructure protection.

2. Blue Bastion DEMONSTRATOR CALL

2.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE Blue Bastion PROGRAMME

- **Accelerating deployable innovation for the protection of critical maritime infrastructure:** Rapidly demonstrating innovative solutions in relevant maritime environments (TRL 5–6), addressing concrete and urgent protection challenges.
- **Stimulating collaborative innovation through consortia:** Fostering structured cooperation between industry, knowledge institutions, and relevant operational stakeholders to develop integrated, system-level solutions rather than isolated technologies.
- **Demonstrating solutions in near-realistic operational conditions:** Demonstrating that systems, subsystems, or system-of-systems function effectively in representative maritime contexts, with attention to integration, interoperability, and performance.
- **Aligning demonstrator projects with the strategic roadmap:** Ensuring that each project contributes to priority capabilities, use cases, and development lines identified in the roadmap, thereby strengthening coherence and focus across the ecosystem.
- **Reducing innovation and implementation risks:** Using short, focused projects (3–6 months) to identify and mitigate technological, operational, and collaboration risks at an early stage.
- **Generating input for the research and innovation agenda:** Producing validated insights, new research questions, and identified capability gaps that feed directly into the Blue Bastion Research instruments and wider research agendas at regional, national, and European levels.
- **Identigying possible solutions for the European market and innovation landscape:** Supporting consortia in positioning their solutions for European scale-up by creating alignment with European programmes, standards, interoperability requirements, and future international collaboration opportunities.
- **Building visible and repeatable ecosystem impact:** Leveraging the six-monthly repetition of the demonstrator call to enable iterative learning, cumulative knowledge build-up, and increasing ecosystem maturity.
- **Enabling progression towards operational innovation and scaling:** Laying the groundwork for follow-on activities towards TRL 6–7, including upscaling, operational validation, and potential deployment in civilian and defence-related maritime contexts.

This is the first call in the Blue Bastion programme

2.2. DEMONSTRATION AND ECOSYSTEM BUILDING

The end product of a Blue Bastion Demonstrator project is a proven demonstration of a solution for the protection of critical maritime infrastructure, validated in a relevant and representative context (TRL 5–6). The project must clearly demonstrate its contribution to the priority capabilities and use cases defined in the roadmap established through the feasibility study.

2.2.1. CORE EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FINAL DELIVERABLE

A Blue Bastion Demonstrator is expected to deliver at least:

- A functional demonstrator (technology, integrated solution, or system-of-systems) validated in a realistic maritime environment or setting.
- A clearly defined, operationally relevant use case for critical maritime infrastructure protection.
- Documented technical and operational performance, including lessons learned, limitations, and conditions for further development or scaling.
- A substantiated pathway towards follow-on activities, including progression to higher TRLs (TRL 6–7), operational innovation projects, or European-level scale-up, or open research questions.

2.2.2. DEMONSTRATION AND FEEDBACK

The programme requires demonstrator results to be actively demonstrated and shared within the ecosystem:

- At least one demonstration during the Navy Captains of Industry Day is mandatory. This demonstration must clearly showcase the functioning, added value, and potential operational relevance of the solution for both industrial and operational stakeholders.
- Where feasible, demonstrators are expected to be tested or validated during operational exercises, preferably:
    - at Belgian level (e.g. in cooperation with the Belgian Navy or other maritime security actors), and/or
    - at European level, within the context of international collaborations, exercises, or test environments.

Such testing strengthens operational credibility and supports preparation for European innovation and market trajectories.

2.2.3. ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE BLUE CLUSTER ECOSYSTEM

Active participation in the Blue Cluster ecosystem is a mandatory requirement within a Blue Bastion Demonstrator project. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Participation in relevant ecosystem activities (events, workshops, community sessions).
- Knowledge sharing and coordination with other Blue Bastion projects to enhance coherence and complementarity.
- Contributions to the further refinement of the ecosystem roadmap and to the input for the research and innovation agenda.

To enable this active and long-term engagement, all members of a Blue Bastion Demonstrator consortium are **members and partners of the Blue Cluster**. The Blue Cluster organisation will actively support consortium partners in this process and facilitate their integration into the ecosystem, ensuring access to the relevant networks, events, and collaboration opportunities.

Demonstrator projects are therefore assessed not only on their technical output, but also on their engagement, collaboration, and contribution to the broader ecosystem.

2.3. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR PROJECT PARTNERS

This call is open to Belgian public and private non-profit research institutes and private companies.

From the public research sector, all Belgian universities, colleges of higher education, federal scientific institutions, defence research institutes and other public research institutes are eligible partners.

Private non-profit research centres must have operational and/or research activities in Belgium. They must have legal personality and their registered office in Belgium.

From the private sector, companies (including SMEs) complying with the following criteria are eligible partners:

- The company must have operational and/or research activities on the Belgian territory.
- The company must have a legal personality and its registered office in Belgium. The legal personality is required at the latest when signing the research contract.
- At the moment of signing the contract, the company must have fulfilled its obligations to pay its taxes and social security contributions.
- Consortium partners must be members of the Blue Cluster.

Foreign partners cannot participate in the call.

The project partnership is a triple helix composition where academia and industry work together to foster R&T(D) for Defence. Specific partnership requirements are set out in section 3.6.

2.3.1. NOTES FOR COMPANIES, A(I)SBL AND FOUNDATIONS:

The delivery of the following documents is a formal requirement for a valid application for the call:

- As foreseen in the law of 18 September 2017, companies, a(i)sbl and foundations must have submitted accurate and current information on their beneficial owners to the UBO (Ultimate Beneficial Owner) register of the FPS Finances. The extract of the UBO register must be provided by e-mail to blue-bastion@blauwecluster.be before 8 June 2026 (23h59). completed
- The consent form relating to the law of 20 December 2024 on classification and security clearances, security advice and the publicly regulated service (available in Dutch and French on the Blue Bastion website) must be by the natural persons listed on the UBO form sent on later stage to the project office (procedure will be communicated). A negative opinion from the administrative authority for at least one of the persons listed on the UBO may result in the legal entity being refused participation in the project.
- A company Honourability & Vulnerability self-assessment declaration must be delivered to guarantee the company honourability, ethics & professional conduct. This declaration must be sent by e-mail to blue-bastion@blauwecluster.be before 8 June 2026 (23h59).

For funded partners and subcontracts: You are a company, a(i)sbl or a foundation?		
Document	**Name and format of the file**	**How to deliver?**
Extract from the UBO-register	ACRONYM_UBO_COMPANY.pdf	E-mail to blue-cluster@blauwecluster.be
Consent form(s) for security verification	ACRONYM_CONSENT_COMPANY_PERSON.pdf	tbd
Proof(s) of dispatch of the consent form(s) for security verification	ACRONYM_PROOF_COMPANY_PERSON.pdf	tbd
Company Honourability & vulnerability self-assessment declaration	ACRONYM_DECLARATION.pdf	E-mail to blue-cluster@blauwecluster.be
Failing to deliver these documents will result in exclusion of the proposal		

2.4. INFORMATION DAY

To inform potential applicants about the context, scope and modalities of this call and to offer them network opportunities, an information day will be held on Wednesday 6

May 2026 in Brussels. Registration prior to the event is required. More details are announced through Blue Bastion website as well as through social media.

3. CALL INFORMATION

3.1. DOCUMENTATION RELATED TO THIS CALL

The following documents are available on the Blue Bastion website (https://www.blauwecluster.be/blue-bastion-innovatieprojecten)

- Project-idea 2 pager.
- Innovation Roadmap Critical Maritime Infrastructure Protection.
- Information document, including submission and evaluation guidelines and budget rules: general information on the programme and the call, overview proposal content and corresponding evaluation criteria for the applicants and the evaluators (the present document)
- Evaluation matrix for proposals: overview of the evaluation ratings for the proposals
- FAQ
- Proposal structure (word-file available on the website platform)
- DMP
- Veiligheidsverificatie toestemming – Vérification de sécurité consentement
- Company Honourability & Vulnerability self-assessment declaration
- Ethics self-assessment
- Gantt chart
- Budget file
- Blue Cluster membership overview and application

3.2. INDICATIVE CALENDAR OF THE CALL

	Date	**At/via**
Ideation phase	April-May	Blue Cluster
Information session	6 May 2026	Brussels
Deadline proposal	8 June 2026 (23h59)	Mail
Eligibility check	10 June 2026	Blue Cluster & RHID
WAR and Steering Comite evaluation	25 June 2026	Blue Cluster
Final selection of proposals	1 July 2026	RHID
Communication of results to applicants	3 July 2026	Mail

3.3. RESEARCH THEMES AND INDICATIVE BUDGET OF THIS CALL

The present call covers the theme of Critical Maritime Infrastructure Protection as defined by the maritime security roadmap.

The maximum subsidy budget per project is up to 350,000 EUR. Applicants should take into consideration the most efficient use of public resources.

The number of projects that will be funded depends on the evaluation of the proposals. Passing the threshold of excellence and quality, the best ranked proposals will be funded. The proposals will be put together in a ranking list based on their final evaluation.

Budget transfers between the projects are possible.

3.4. THEME CRITICAL MARITIME INFRASTRUCTURE PROTECTION

3.4.1. CONTEXT

The North Sea and Belgian ports have become strategic hubs for energy supply, digital infrastructure and international logistics, while at the same time becoming increasingly vulnerable to hybrid threats such as sabotage, cyberattacks, underwater intrusions and conventional military actions.

Belgium possesses strong knowledge and industrial capabilities in domains such as mine countermeasures, autonomous underwater systems, sensor integration and AI-driven data fusion, with recognised excellence within EU and NATO frameworks. The innovation roadmap applies the **DDIRR model (Deter, Detect & Identify, Respond, Repair)** as a guiding framework to address maritime security and defence in an integrated and future-oriented manner, with a clear focus on dual-use technologies and public-private cooperation.

3.4.2. SCOPE (PRIORITY TECHNOLOGY DOMAINS)

The roadmap identifies a coherent set of priorities that together form the maritime security ecosystem:

- **Surveillance and sensor networks (fixed and mobile):** Multimodal detection above, on and below the water surface using radar, cameras, sonar and smart buoys, supported by AI and sensor fusion for persistent situational awareness.
- **Drones and autonomous platforms (UAV, USV, UUV):** Autonomous systems capable of coordinated operations (swarming) for ISR, mine countermeasures, perimeter protection and response, with emphasis on robustness in GPS-denied environments.
- **Automation and robotics:** Infrastructure-bound and mobile systems that partially automate detection, response and recovery, including underwater robotics for inspection, neutralisation and repair.
- **Communication and connectivity:** Secure, redundant and interoperable networks (satellite communications, offshore 5G, acoustic underwater

communications) that are resilient to jamming and spoofing and enable seamless data exchange.

- **Data analytics and artificial intelligence:** AI-based threat detection, predictive analysis, multisource data integration and decision support, while keeping humans in the loop.
- **Cybersecurity and digital resilience:** Secure-by-design architectures, real-time cyber-threat detection, redundancy and recovery capabilities for maritime operational and IT systems.
- Collaboration and interoperability: Civil-military and international cooperation, shared standards and test environments to accelerate the transition of innovation to operational use.

3.4.3. IMPACT FOR DEFENCE

For defence, the roadmap delivers targeted reinforcement of maritime operational capability and resilience:

- Enhanced deterrence and protection of critical maritime and subsea infrastructure (Underwater Domain Protection).
- Faster and more accurate detection and identification of threats through integrated ISR chains and AI-enabled situational awareness.
- Flexible and scalable response options through autonomous systems and manned-unmanned teaming, including in hybrid threat scenarios.
- Improved resilience and recovery capacity after physical or cyber incidents through robotic repair and cyber resilience.
- International interoperability and alignment with EU and NATO missions, positioning Belgium as a frontrunner in autonomous and underwater technologies.

In summary, the innovation roadmap provides a clear strategic framework to directly link technological innovation in the Blue Bastion projects to operational defence needs, using dual-use innovation as a lever for both security and industrial strengthening.

3.5. PROJECT DURATION

The projects will have a duration of maximum 6 months.

3.6. PROJECT PARTNERSHIP

3.6.1. PARTNERSHIP

Partnerships between research and industry are **mandatory**. If a proposal is submitted, it must contain at least one private company and one research institute. All types of organisations can act as project leader.

Partnership:

- At least one private company
- At least one research institute

Belgian Defence research institutes (Royal Military Academy (RMA), Military Hospital Queen Astrid (MHQA), the Defence Laboratories (DLD)) and Blue Cluster are eligible partners. However, it will not have a beneficial effect on the evaluation result (no bonus).

3.6.2. STAKEHOLDERS

Blue Bastion demonstrator projects are expected to engage their stakeholders—such as end users, infrastructure operators, authorities, and industry partners—in a structured and continuous way throughout the project, by involving them early in defining use cases and requirements, actively seeking feedback during development and testing, and validating results in real or realistic operational settings. The Blue Cluster will support the consortium in this task.

This close interaction ensures that demonstrators address concrete operational needs, are technically and organisationally feasible, and gain early support from potential adopters. Effective stakeholder engagement is therefore critical to maximise the relevance, credibility, and impact of the demonstrator, to accelerate learning for all parties involved, and to increase the likelihood that project outcomes can be successfully scaled, adopted, or transitioned into follow-on research, innovation, or operational deployment.

3.6.3. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN THE PROJECT

Project partners jointly share obligations and responsibilities during the implementation of the project. The project should be fairly balanced, even if different partners may have different tasks and subsequently different budgets.

A coordinator must be appointed in each network proposal.

For each project, a Steering Committee shall be established at the start of the project to act as the governing body (see section 6.3).

3.6.3.1. ROLE OF THE COORDINATOR

The coordinator is responsible for the overall project management and coordination. He/she is the contact person for the RHID to communicate with the partnership and must transfer all relevant information to the other project partners. He/she shall:

- Coordinate all activities to be carried out in the framework of the project,
- Coordinate the internal meetings between the network members,
- Coordinate the production of the required project reports intended for Belgian Defence as described in section 6.4.,
- Coordinate the synthesis and translation of the research results, with a view to applications and support for decision-making,
- Coordinate the publication and dissemination of the research results,
- Convene meetings of the Steering Committee and write the reports of these meetings. The coordinator shall give notice in writing of a meeting with the agenda to each member no later than fourteen (14) calendar days in advance,
- Inform the Steering Committee and the RHID of any problems that might hinder the implementation of the project.

3.6.3.2. SUBCONTRACTORS

The project may require specific or punctual expertise, which can be delivered in the form of subcontracting. It is the responsibility of the project team to ensure that the rules and practices of the subcontractor, and in particular the ownership and valorisation of research results, publications and communications, are compatible with the rules governing the call. The project team takes full responsibility for the final result of the subcontracted work.

Subcontractors must be registered in Belgium. Subcontractors that are companies, a(i)sbl and foundations must submit accurate and current information on their beneficial owners to the UBO (Ultimate Beneficial Owner) register of the FPS Finances and deliver an extract of the UBO register to the DEFRA secretariat.

In case the subcontractor needs access to classified information, the subcontractor must also obtain a security clearance (see section 7.2).

Subcontractors must be registered in Belgium. If they are a company, a(i)sbl or foundation, they must provide: - An extract from the UBO register - Proof of delivery of security verification consent - Company honourability & vulnerability awareness self-assessment

3.7. RESEARCH ETHICS

The "Code of Ethics for Scientific Research in Belgium" is a joint initiative of the Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, the Académie Royale de Médecine de Belgique, the Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten and the Koninklijke Academie voor Geneeskunde van België.

All projects must take this code of ethics into account in their research. If applicable, it is the responsibility of the applicants to consult the relevant Ethical Board for their organisation before submitting a proposal.

The code of ethics for scientific research in Belgium is available here http://www.belspo.be/belspo/organisation/publ/pub_ostc/Eth_code/ethcode_en.pdf

It is the responsibility of the applicants to consult the relevant Ethical Board for their organisation before submitting a proposal.

Applicants will be required to complete an "ethics self-assessment" when preparing the proposal. The Ethical Advisory Board of the RHID will assess this information and can advise the partnership how to deal with the ethical aspects of its proposal.

3.8. BUDGET RULES

Financing by Defence: The selected projects are entitled to receive state aid following approach:

- Financing by Defence: This call is subject to the European legislation on State Funding (Art 107 (1) TFEU and the General Block Exemption Regulation in particular.

Therefore, financing a public research institute or a private non-profit research centre is set to a maximum of 100% of the eligible costs. Financing a private company is limited to a maximum of 65% of the eligible costs (large enterprise), with a potential maximum of 80% (small enterprise & medium enterprise), according to the size of the company.

Small, Medium-sized and Large enterprises are defined as in the Commission Recommendation of 6 May 2003 concerning the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (Text with EEA relevance) (notified under document number C(2003) 1422)[1]

[1] 2EUR-Lex - 02013R1407-20231025 - EN - EUR-Lex 3EUR-Lex - 52022XC1028(03) - EN - EUR-Lex 4"Following application of the protection of Belgian Essential Security Interests invoking Art 346, 1,b of the TFEU" 5EUR-Lex - 32003H0361 - EN - EUR-Lex

The total project budget must be detailed in the tables of the budget file (100% cost) of the full proposal. Additional columns are foreseen to indicate the partner contribution to the total project cost (depending on the partner type) and the subsequent RHID funding contribution. (section 6.5 of the full proposal template: Budget assessment)

The project budget is reserved exclusively for the project activities. The different categories of expenditure financed by Defence are:

Staff: Pre-tax wages associated with increases in the cost of living, employers' social security and statutory insurance contributions, as well as any other compensation or allowance due by law and secondary to the salary itself. Defence does not allow cumulative wages for staff. Staff members bound contractually to a public institution - full time or part time - cannot apply for him/herself for Defence staff budget for that part.

The RHID prefers staff to be hired under a labour contract.

Costs related to non-employee staff, i.e. staff working in a management company, as freelancer or interim staff on behalf of the partner are also accepted.

Tax-free doctoral or post-doctoral scholarships are not accepted.

For persons to be hired for the project (so not identified by name in the proposal), the staff costs are limited to a maximum amount of:

- 5 700 €/month FTE for a technician/bachelor (regardless of years of experience)
- 8 000 €/month FTE for a Master (regardless of years of experience)
- 8 700 €/month FTE for a Master in engineering (regardless of years of experience)
- 10 500 €/month FTE for a PhD (regardless of years of experience)

The funding is limited to the time and period in which the (employee and non-employee) staff participates in the project.

General operating costs: this includes daily/usual supplies and products for the laboratory, workshop and office, documentation, consignments, use of daily software and IT facilities, organisation of internal meetings, etc. The general operating budget may not exceed 15% of the overall project staff budget for the project coordinator and 10% for the other project partners. The amounts claimed must correspond to actual expenditures strictly related to the project, even if supporting documents are not requested. Although no detailed justification is required for these costs, the administration of the concerned partner must keep these invoices in its accounts in the event of an audit.

Specific operating costs: this includes a list of operating costs specific to the execution of the project tasks, such as costs for project analyses, testing, maintenance and repair of equipment purchased by the project, use of specific IT facilities and

software, costs for surveys, open data publications, organisation of workshops and events, etc. These costs need to be clearly described in the proposal and each of them shall be justified by invoices during the project.

Overheads: Institutions' general overheads that cover, in one lump sum, administration, telephone, postal, maintenance, heating, lighting, electricity, rent, machine depreciation, and insurance costs. The total amount of this item is set as a fix amount of 10% of the total staff and operating costs.

Equipment: List of investment goods specific to the implementation of the project and to be purchased on the project budget. It concerns the purchase and installation of scientific and technical equipment and instruments, Blue Bastion - Call for proposals 2026 including computer equipment, to be entered in the inventory or assets of the institute/company. Equipment needs to be clearly described in the proposal and shall be justified by invoices.

Subcontracting: Expenses incurred by a third party to carry out project tasks or provide services that require special scientific or technical competences outside the partner's normal area of activity. The amount may not exceed 25% of the total budget allocated to the partner concerned. If the subcontractor is not yet known then only the nature, the planned duration and the estimated amount needs to be indicated in the proposal.

	STAFF COSTS (monthly costs)	GENERAL OPERATION COSTS	SPECIFIC OPERATION COSTS	OVERHEADS	EQUIPMENT	SUBCONTRACTING
PROJECT COORDINATOR	**Technician**: 5 700€/month	15% of Staff costs *(Automatically generated)*	-	10% of [Staff costs + Operation costs] *(Automatically generated)*	-	Max. 25% of the total budget of this partner
	Master: 8 000€/month					
	Master (engineering): 8 700€/month					
	PhD: 10 500€/month					
OTHER PROJECT PARTNERS	**Technician**: 5 700€/month	10% of Staff costs *(Automatically generated)*	-	10% of [Staff costs + Operation costs] *(Automatically generated)*	-	Max. 25% of the total budget of this partner
	Master: 8 000€/month					
	Master (engineering): 8 700€/month					
	PhD: 10 500€/month					

3.9. GENDER

The RHID strongly encourages the applicants to take into account the equality between women and men and to ensure gender mainstreaming in the implementation of the project. The project should include this both in the choice of the researchers and, where relevant, by integrating the gender dimension into their research.

4. SUBMISSION PROCEDURE

The submission of projects will be done in one phase using the following e-mail:

4.1. PROPOSAL

Your proposal and the required documents must be submitted at the latest on 8 June 2026 (23h59) by e-mail to blue-bastion@blauwecluster.be

The proposal form can be downloaded from the website and must contain all following information:

- The title and acronym of the project
- The coordinates of the foreseen partners, if applicable
- Executive Summary of the project
- Keywords (min 2; max 6).
- Scope and objectives,
- State of the art and innovative character,
- Relevance and potential impact for Defence, including the data management plan and quality of the partners/partnership of the project,
- The work plan: work packages, the project risk assessment, the budget assessment.
- The name and contact details of 2 to 4 scientific experts (Belgian and/or foreign experts) capable of assessing the proposal. Optionally, the name and contact details of 2 non-grata scientific experts to be excluded from the evaluation of the proposal under the condition of sufficient motivation.

As a separate document which can be downloaded from the website:

- DMP
- The GANTT chart
- Budget file
- Ethics Self-Assessment
- The Company Honourability Document
- The consent for verification (N or F)

The total length of each section of the proposal should not exceed the word count limit indicated.
Companies, a(i)sbl and foundations must deliver the extract of the Ultimate Beneficial Owner (UBO) register as an annex to the proposal (in pdf format) and sent it by e-mail to blue-bastion@blauwecluster.be . The same applies to the document “Company Honourability & Vulnerability self-assessment declaration”

The proof of dispatch of the form “veiligheidsverificatie_toestemming / vérification de sécurité_consentement” and the must be sent on a later stage in the application process (information will be provided to the consortia).

Please provide these documents grouped by proposal by proposal. RHID and Blue Cluster will perform an eligibility check based on the proposal documents. The proposals that have passed the eligibility check will be evaluated, see next section

5. EVALUATION PROCEDURE AND CRITERIA

Only proposals that are complete and submitted on time will be taken into account.

5.1. STEP 0: PRE-PROPOSAL CONSULTATION

Prior to the submission of a full proposal, applicants are strongly encouraged to discuss their project idea with The Blue Cluster innovation managers by means of a concise two-page pre-proposal. This pre-proposal outlines the project concept, intended objectives, envisaged consortium, addressed use cases, and its preliminary alignment with the Blue Bastion scope and roadmap. Blue Cluster aligns with RHID and Navy on the status and progress of the pre-proposal phase.

The purpose of this step is to:

- provide early feedback on strategic fit with the Blue Bastion programme,
- identify potential improvements in scope, focus, or consortium composition,
- and facilitate early connection with relevant ecosystem partners where appropriate.

This consultation is non-binding and does not constitute a formal evaluation, but it aims to increase the quality and relevance of full proposals submitted to the call.

5.2. STEP 1: ELIGIBILITY CHECK

Blauwe Cluster and RHID will perform an eligibility check on the basis of the proposal documents. Following criteria are applied:

- Completeness of the proposal (all fields fully completed, UBO extracts available, and the “Company Honourability & Vulnerability self-assessment declaration” available, additional documents available)(see section 4.1)
- Inivation to submit the the form “veiligheidsverificatie_toestemming / vérification de sécurité_consentement”
- Eligibility of each project partner (see section 2.3),
- Partnership composition (see section 3.6.1).
- Membership of Blue Cluster.

5.3. STEP 2: ALIGNMENT WITH ROADMAP AND SCOPE

As a first step, RHID, The Blue Cluster, and the Navy jointly assess the proposal’s alignment with the Blue Bastion roadmap and the scope of the call. This assessment verifies that the proposal:

- falls clearly within the thematic and strategic focus of the call,
- contributes to the capability priorities identified in the roadmap,

- and is appropriate for a Blue Bastion Demonstrator project in terms of ambition, maturity, and intended validation.

The outcome of this step is a documented alignment check, which forms the basis for the subsequent in-depth evaluation.

5.4. STEP 3: SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL EVALUATION BY THE SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY BOARD

Eligible and aligned proposals are subsequently evaluated by the Scientific Advisory Board (WAR). The WAR performs an independent and in-depth assessment of the proposal, focusing on scientific quality, innovation, feasibility, and impact. The WAR assigns scores and provides concise qualitative feedback based on the common evaluation criteria defined for the call.

5.5. STEP 4: CONSOLIDATION AND RECOMMENDATION BY THE BLUE CLUSTER STEERING COMMITTEE

Building on the roadmap alignment check and the evaluation results of the WAR, the Blue Cluster Maritime Security Steering Committee of industrial partners performs an integrated assessment of the proposal.

The Steering Committee considers strategic coherence, overall portfolio balance, feasibility, industrial possibilities and expected economic impact. Based on this assessment, the Steering Committee prepares a substantiated evaluation proposal, including a recommendation (e.g. recommended, recommended under conditions, or not recommended), which is submitted to RHID.

5.6. STEP 5: FINAL DECISION BY RHID AND NAVY

RHID makes the final funding decision, taking into consideration the evaluation proposal prepared by the Steering Committee, the scores and advice of the WAR, and the strategic objectives of the programme.

5.7. EVALUTION CRITERIA

The WAR, Steering Committee, and RHID all assess and score proposals against the following four criteria:

- The match between the proposal and the scope of the call
- The quality of the proposal, based on the clarity of the project objectives and the level of innovation with respect to the state of the art
- The quality of the partners and the adequacy of the partnership
- The relevance and potential impact for Defence

These complementary evaluations ensure that selected Blue Bastion Demonstrator projects are strategically aligned, scientifically sound, operationally relevant, and capable of delivering tangible impact for Defence.

The individual evaluations are not communicated to the applicants.

6. ROYAL DECREE AND CONTRACTUAL OBLIGATIONS FOR SELECTED PROJECTS

6.1. PROJECT STARTING AND END DATE

The projects selected within the context of the current call will start 1 September '26

The project contracts will have a duration of 6 months plus 1 month to allow meeting all administrative requirements before the effective start-up of the project).

6.2. ROYAL DECREE AND CONTRACTS

For the selected proposals, a Royal Decree is decided, and a contract is conducted between Belgian Defence and the funded partners.

The contract is composed of three parts that make up the research contract:

- Basic Contract
- Annex I: Technical specifications
- Annex II: General conditions applicable to the 2025 contracts.

The basic contract designates the contracting parties (partners and Defence) and contains the general obligations applicable to the project, including the project and contract duration and budget. The basic contract is signed by the heads of the partners involved (directors, rectors, CEOs).

The content of Annex I "Technical specifications" is specifically related to the operational implementation of the project. It includes the detailed work description and schedule, details on funding by expenditure category etc.

Annex I "Technical specifications" is signed by the Blue Bastion programme manager and the promotors concerned.

Annex II "General conditions applicable to the contract" contains all general provisions applicable to all Blue Bastion contracts. It will be made available on the Blue Bastion website and will not be signed.

Belgian Defence/RHID grants the selected projects the funds required for their implementation. The RHID shall reimburse at most, and up to the amount specified in the granted budget, the actual costs proven by the partners providing these costs are directly related to the implementation of the project.

The partnership is encouraged to conclude a Consortium Agreement to define internal regulations regarding intellectual property (access to foreground and background, valorisation rights and modalities, and any other theme deemed necessary). A copy of the signed Consortium Agreement must be handed over to the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID and blue-bastion@blauwecluster.be).

6.3. COMPOSITION AND ROLE OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE

Each project will be accompanied by a Steering Committee, to be set up at the start of the project. The Steering Committee is composed of the project managers of the partners, the programme manager, the research manager of Defence and the intended end user.

The Steering Committee acts as a governance body, to ensure that the project remains in line with the research objectives and adapt the project plan accordingly whenever necessary. It ensures that the project reporting is done in accordance with section 6.4.

The Steering Committee should meet at least once a month to discuss the project's progress.

The organisation of such meeting must be included in the project work plan and the project budget.

The following actions and decisions will be taken by the Steering Committee:

- Examine information collected by the coordinator on the progress of the Project, to assess the compliance of the Project with the Proposal and, if necessary, propose modification of the Proposal.
- Determine the policy for press releases, joint publications and other public disclosures regarding the Project.
- Keep a register of Foreground generated within the Project and patents filed thereon, which is concluded at the end of the Project.
- Examine and approve proposed changes to the work programme. In case of actions with a budgetary impact, the Steering Committee will make proposals to the funding authority but cannot decide without the approval of this funding authority.
- If necessary, propose the termination of all or part of the Project.

6.4. REPORTS

The contract foresees the following reports to be submitted to Blue Cluster and RHID:

- Initial report: to be submitted within three weeks of the start of the project.

- Progress report(s): to be submitted according to the specifications in the contract (annex 1, technical specifications).
- Final report: to be submitted one month after the end of the project.
- If deemed useful by the RHID, an additional report may be requested for an external evaluation of the project.
- The RHID can ask for a report or other input at any time during the course of the project in order to provide scientific support to valorisation and service actions related to the programme.

These reports are to be included in the project work plan and the cost of preparing them (including possible translations) must be covered by the project budget. They should contain all necessary information to assess the progress of the project in relation to the work packages, deliverables and budget. Problems must be identified, including possible solutions.

To evaluate the impact of the Blue Bastion programme, the RHID can ask input from the partnership until 3 years after the end of the project.

7. DATA, RESULTS, INTELLECTUAL OWNERSHIP AND SECURITY REQUIREMENTS

7.1. GENERAL CONDITIONS

The Data Management Plan (DMP), to be submitted as part of the proposal, describes how the project partners deal with the collected data before, during and after the project. It is a key element of good data management.

For all aspects regarding the use of data, intellectual ownership and valorisation of the project results and the confidentiality or security requirements, the conditions of the General Conditions (Annex II of the contract and the articles 12, 13 and 14 in particular) apply.

Ownership of existing information and data (the individual background) remains with the original owner.

As a principle, the Foreground - the results (including information) produced by the project - shall be the property of the partner carrying out the work generating this foreground.

The principles for the use of joint foreground will have to be determined by the project partners, with respect for these General Conditions. These principles can be included in a Consortium Agreement to be concluded between the partners.

7.2. CLASSIFIED INFORMATION/SECURITY RELATED ACTIVITIES

Projects aiming at developing or using sensitive or classified information's will not be funded by Blue Bastion. However, certain activities undertaken in the frame of the projects may generate classified information. This paragraph solely concerns protective measures to be taken to preserve the confidentiality of security-sensitive information regarding these projects.

A classification is given to documents to prevent their improper use which could damage, among other things, the fulfilment of the tasks of Defence, the external security and international relations of the State and the scientific and economic potential of the country (for the complete list see "Wet van 20 Dec 2024 Art 3/Loi du 20 Déc 2024 Art 3").

According to the same law this identification should be based on the following classification levels:

- The "TRES SECRET/ZEER GEHEIM" level is assigned to a piece if its improper use could cause EXTREMELY SERIOUS damage to the main Belgian interests listed in the law. Topics that qualify under this category cannot be part of the project. •

- The "SECRET/GEHEIM" level is assigned to a document if its improper use could cause SERIOUSLY damage to the interests listed in the law.
- The "CONFIDENTIEL/VERTROUWELIJK" level is assigned to a document if its improper use could harm any of the interests listed in the law.

Documents of which the originator wants to limit the distribution to persons who are authorized to use them on a need-to-know basis, without however attaching legal consequences to this limitation, are marked with the indication "DIFFUSION RESTREINTE/BEPERKTE VERSPREIDING".

These classification levels should be applied both to the need to protect information and the need to avoid unnecessary obstruction to the use of research information and results.

Applicants should identify in the proposal the classification needs for the work packages of the project that involve threat and /or vulnerability assessments and the information on specifications or capabilities of the tool(s) used.

- threat assessments (i.e. estimation of the likelihood of a malicious act against an asset, with particular reference to factors such as intention, capacity and potential impact)
- vulnerability assessments (i.e. description of gaps or weaknesses which can be exploited during malicious acts, and often contain suggestions to eliminate or diminish these weaknesses)
- specifications (i.e. exact guidelines on the design, composition, manufacture, maintenance or operation of threat substances or countermeasure substances, technologies and procedures)
- capability assessments (i.e. description of the ability of an asset, system, network, service or authority to fulfil its intended role — and in particular the capacity of units, installations, systems, technologies, substances and personnel that have security-related functions to carry these out successfully.

Based on the assessment of the provided input a security screening by Belgian Defence might be imposed in the contract on ALL partners and subcontractors of the selected project(s). In that case, these beneficiaries should obtain a security clearance before starting work on classified parts of the project.

The applicable security framework for the action must be in place at the latest before the signature of the contract and will be considered as an annex to the contract. More information can be found on the website of the National Security Authority (Nationale Veiligheidsoverheid – Autorité Nationale de Sécurité) https://www.nvoans.be/

Persons that are involved in a project must be nationals of a country of the European Union or nationals of a country of the European Free Trade Association or nationals of a

country that is a member of NATO. Persons involved in a project may be subject to a verification. Only after a positive verification, a person can be recruited to the project.

8. COMPLAINTS

RHID and Blue Cluster places great importance on the quality of their service and on improving the way they operate. RHID and Blue Cluster will handle complaints about the administrative handling of this call for proposals and/or about content of the call and the contracts that are concluded as a result of the call.

A special form to handle complaints has been created. The complaint form is available through the website of Blue Bastion.

Complaints submitted anonymously or which are offensive or not related to our organisation will not be processed.

A complaint is handled as follows:

- Once your complaint has been filed, a notification of receipt will be sent.
- The complaint will be forwarded to the relevant departments and individuals and will be processed within one month.
- An answer will be sent by e-mail or letter.
- The complaint will be treated with strict confidentiality.

If you are dissatisfied by the initial response to a complaint, you can always contact the Médiateur Fédéral / Federal Ombudsman, rue de Louvain 48 bte 6 / Leuvenseweg 48 bus 6, 1000 Brussels (email: contact@mediateurfederal.be / contact@federaalombudsman.be).

9. CONTACTS

Further information can be obtained by contacting: blue-bastion@blauwecluster.be